

Church, and for lack of conventicles * met in caves and woods.' ¹ A distinctive character was thus given to the worship of the new English heretics ; it was a worship essentially Protestant, and did not depend for its performance on priest or Church. Although we have no account of the meetings of these first nonconformists, their character can be gathered from the writings of Wycliffe and his followers, who again and again insist on the greater importance of preaching and the smaller importance of ceremonies. Preaching, they declared, was the first duty of clergymen, and of more benefit to the laity than any Sacrament. The sermon was the special weapon of the early reformers; it was the distinguishing mark of Wycliffe's Poor Priests. Their chief rivals in this art, as in everything else, were the friars, of whose sermons there were always enough and to spare. But Wycliffe accused the friars of preaching to amuse men and to win their money > making up for want of real earnestness by telling stories more popular than edifying. He wanted an entirely different class of preacher, one who should call people to repentance, and make the sermon the great instrument for reformation of life and manners. To Wycliffe preaching seemed the most effectual means by which to arouse men to a sense of their personal relation to God, and of the consequent importance of their every action. Absolution, masses, pardons, and penance commuted for money were so many ways of keeping all real feeling of responsibility out of the mind. * To preach to edifying' became the care of the Lollards, in the place of ceremonies and rituals.²

On the important questions of image worship and the cultus of saints, too indissolubly connected by the practice of the time to be considered separately, Wycliffe led the way with a caution and respect for usage akin to his moderation in the questions of confession and penance. Having been a devotedly religious man all his life, and having for the first forty years of it lived within the pale of orthodoxy, it was impossible that he should be altogether without sympathy for

¹ Waldensis, caps. 143-7 ; S. E. TF., iii. 488

² *Opus Evangelicum*, i. 375; S* E. TF., iii. 202, 376 ;
Matt. 57, 110 • Pol Works, i. 261.

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